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File Code: 3420 **Date:** September 28, 2005
Route To:

Subject: Potential Insect and Disease Prevention/Suppression Project, Smokey Bear RD

To: Forest Supervisor, Lincoln National Forest

On September 2, Dave Conklin of our staff met with Ruth Esperance (NEPA coordinator, Sacramento RD) for a brief examination of a planned thinning area in the wildland- urban interface (WUI) near Ruidoso. The objective of this site visit was to examine stand conditions and determine if this project area might be suitable for funding under our insect and disease prevention/suppression program.

The main area we examined encompasses the steep north slopes above Grindstone Reservoir, along the southwest edge of Ruidoso. Stand conditions in this dense mixed-conifer forest, along with prevailing winds, make this area of critical concern from a fire hazard perspective. The watershed is crucial to the community, while the reservoir itself is a heavily-used recreation area. The 400+ acre project area also includes a Mexican spotted owl PAC and a northern goshawk PFA.

The forest here is largely unmanaged and has very poor access. Most of the area has never been thinned, although a six-chain buffer directly adjacent to private land was thinned from below last year. (Results of this recent thinning were encouraging; however, significant accumulations of slash remain on the site.) The steep slopes and lack of a road system will clearly make effective treatment of this area difficult and costly.

Many similar drainages north and west of Ruidoso have experienced high levels of white fir mortality (attributed largely to fir engraver beetles) the past two years; recent mortality in the Grindstone area itself has been relatively low. Based on what we observed on our walkthrough, this was largely due to species composition: ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir are more common in this area than white fir. Some recent pine and Douglas fir mortality—much of it associated with dwarf mistletoe infection—was observed. Older pine mortality from previous bark beetle outbreaks is contributing to high fuel-loading. Basal areas--which exceed 150 ft^2/acre in some portions—are certainly conducive to outbreaks of bark beetles.

Like much of the forest around Ruidoso, the Grindstone area has a very high incidence of ponderosa pine dwarf mistletoe. Most of the pines observed were moderately to heavily-infected. Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe is also common, but tends to occur in more limited infection centers.

The prescription Ruth has developed for this area would primarily be a low thinning, retaining basal areas of 70 to 100 ft^2/acre. Although somewhat lower stocking would be desirable from a bark beetle prevention standpoint, this range seems reasonable given the steep slopes, poor access, wildlife constraints, etc. In areas with heavy dwarf mistletoe, the EA calls for creation of

small openings. Although the high incidence of mistletoe would make selection of good "leave trees" difficult in many areas, creating small openings will generally not provide effective mistletoe control. Moreover, creating openings will generate additional slash. We suggest that a standard low thinning approach would be the preferred method for "treating mistletoe" in most areas, especially since the primary objective of the project is reduction in fire hazard.

Given the critical nature of this area and its importance to the community, we would support efforts to reduce fire hazard and improve overall forest health through our insect and disease prevention/suppression program. Please contact Dave Conklin if you have questions about this evaluation or need additional assistance developing a project proposal.

/s/ Debra Allen-Reid
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